

Great Scots! 'it's' a unique linguistic phenomenon

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A new study reveals that in a number of varieties of English spoken in Scotland, the rules of contraction (it's for it is) seem to differ unexpectedly, and asserts that such differences may shed new light on our understanding of language. The study, 'Syntactic variation and auxiliary contraction: the surprising case of Scots', by Gary Thoms (New York University), David Adger (Queen Mary University of London), Caroline Heycock (University of Edinburgh) and Jennifer Smith (University of Glasgow) will be published in September 2019 issue of the scholarly journal *Language*.

Contractions are widespread in English. However, there are certain rules about what can be contracted where—rules that speakers follow without ever having been taught them, and without being consciously aware of them. For example, speakers happily say It's in the box but not I don't know where it's. Such rules seem to apply to every variety of English, whether it be spoken in Philadelphia, London or the Caribbean.

The starting point for the article is the rule that forbids contraction in examples like I don't know where it's, which is one of the most exceptionless rules of contraction in English varieties. Previous work showed that the problem is the presence of a 'gap' directly after the contraction (I don't know where it's___), the idea being that the sentence starts as I don't know it is where, but we move the where back before the it is when we actually utter the sentence. Many modern theories of syntax involve the existence of these two "layers" of structure—the [word order](#) we speak and hear may come from an "underlying" order that is

quite different.

In the article, the authors investigate what looks like a curiously specific exemption from this restriction found in some dialects of Scots: speakers readily allow contraction in examples like *Here it's!* or *There it's!*, which are used in the context of discoveries or sudden realizations (*Where's my book???* Ah, *there it's!*). The authors seek to explain why contraction is possible just in these types of sentences, which they call locative discovery expressions, and only in one specific subpart of the English dialect continuum.

To investigate this, the authors analyzed data from the [Scots Syntax Atlas](#), a new online digital resource for the study of Scots. The atlas provides original data on hundreds of grammatical phenomena from more than 140 locations across Scotland, gathered in face-to-face interviews by community-insider fieldworkers. The authors found out that many varieties of Scots also allow a kind of locative discovery expression where speakers repeat the word *there* (or *here*), so they say things like *There it's there!*. And it turns out that all speakers who can say *There it's!* can also say *There it's there!*, but not vice versa.

But—if in *There it's there!* the word conveying the location is that second *there*, that gets the accent, then what's the purpose of that first *there*? In Scots, the initial *there* has become simply a kind of particle, serving to introduce this kind of discovery expression but not conveying any actual meaning itself—it's a butler of sorts.

And what about the speakers who say not only *There it's there!* but also *There it's!*? The authors argue that in this group of speakers' minds, there is an unpronounced *there* after the verb. So for them *There it's!* doesn't violate the rule that it can't contract to *it's* next to a gap left by moving something, because nothing did move. There is a silent *there* after the *it's*—we could write it as *There it's there!*

This article shows that the general rules on [contraction](#) in English really are general. But more importantly, it demonstrates that these rules make reference to very abstract differences in grammatical structure: ~~there~~ is different from a gap __, even though they are both silent. What looked like a peculiar feature of Scots dialects turns out to provide evidence for speakers' unconscious knowledge of differences in structure between sentences, differences which are not directly perceived.

More information: [www.linguisticsociety.org/site ...
t/files/LSA95302.pdf](http://www.linguisticsociety.org/site...t/files/LSA95302.pdf)

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